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AUTHOR	Westheimer, Joel
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ABSTRACT

"Horace's Compromise" by T. Sizer is one of several studies that emerged from a 1981-82 investigation sponsored jointly by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Association of Independent Schools. "Horace's School" revisited the issues with practical advice for educators. Sizer advocated whole-hearted reorganization of the ways in which educators think about secondary schooling. His major criticism was that schools do not stimulate student ability to think, reason, and develop intellectually. A simplified curriculum is essential for this effort, even though the reorganization it requires is in itself quite complex. "Horace" is a fictionalized English teacher doing his best under a staggering workload. Sizer used Horace's experiences to advocate student exhibitions of mastery, with the content and form of exhibitions to be decided by a committee of faculty and community members. Concrete examples of change are presented in a context that considers the daily lives of students. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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Book Review

America's House of Cards: Rethinking the High-School Curriculum

Reviews of *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* by Theodore R. Sizer. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1984, 257 pp., and *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School* by Theodore R. Sizer. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1992, 238 pp.

JOEL WESTHEIMER
Stanford University
Stanford, California

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Horace's Compromise *is one of several volumes that emerged from "A Study of High Schools," a 1981–82 investigation sponsored jointly by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). Theodore R. Sizer headed the study.* Horace's School *revisits the issues with practical advice for educators. Former Headmaster of Phillips Andover Academy and former Dean of the Harvard School of Education, Sizer is currently a Professor in the Department of Education at Brown University. Sizer visited more than 50 high schools for his study.*

One of the more stable structures in card house building, my nine-year-old cousin informs me, is the triangle. Three cards placed just so, leaning against each other in a three-way system of support, can be used as an "awesome" foundation. On one architectural design occasion, as she happily laid cards for level four, I couldn't resist asking if her house could survive a slight change—adjusting one of the base triangles, for example. She tried, rotating one card gently counterclockwise. The house jiggled for a moment and collapsed. It was a messy sight, a young architect's nightmare. "The foundation," she reported, "can't change without a whole lot of trouble!"

"The status quo," writes Sizer in *Horace's Compromise*, ". . . has special momentum." At the base of the existing hierarchy are triangles "of student, teacher, and the subject they confront together" (1984, 210). Sizer

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calls for an analysis of the building blocks of educational practice and, like my cousin, sees the difficulty in reforming momentous structures:

> In a typical school of fifteen hundred pupils and ninety-five teachers, the orchestration of the adults with their teaching or counseling or administrative specialties and the students with their five or six course or 'activity' options is a complicated process. Trying to change one piece affects every other . . . Accordingly, things remain the same because it is very difficult to change very much without changing most of everything. (1984, 211)

Horace's Compromise is about school reform—but not the type of reform espoused by so many of the 1980s reports on the condition of the nation's education system. This book is about neither fragmentary change nor a return to the "basics" of instruction. Sizer advocates wholehearted reorganization of the ways in which educators—from policymakers to administrators to teachers to students—think about secondary schooling. His major criticism: schools do not stimulate students' abilities to think, to reason, and to develop intellectually. His explanation: the structure of school schedules is so complex and crowded and the purposes so vague and diluted that they are largely meaningless. His solution: simplify, simplify, simplify; schools need to concentrate on their primary purpose, namely, challenging young minds to think both actively and creatively. While Sizer advocates a simplified curriculum, his plans for school change are actually quite complex.

Horace Smith is a semifictitious English teacher, a composite of the teachers Sizer has met and a portrait that is exceedingly familiar to most educators. Horace's professional world is filled with "adroit accommodations and devastating compromises." Horace works 60-plus hours per week for his students. To supplement his wage, which is comparable to that earned in "semiskilled and low pressure blue-collar jobs," he takes on additional hours tutoring and working in a liquor store. Horace manages five minutes per week to examine the writing of each student and ten minutes of planning for each 50-minute class. According to Sizer, "No one blames the system; everyone blames him" (1984, 20–21).

Horace knows the enormous "chasm between the necessary and the provided." To effectively teach his students, Horace needs a reduced teaching load. Instead, he gets a few staff development days per year on "teacher burnout." But the hypocrisy seems to bother no one. Most are quite satisfied letting it all go on, "a conspiracy . . . toleration . . . big rhetoric and little reality." Horace keeps his bitterness to himself; he knows that he must adjust to an impossible, even improbable situation. That is what everyone expects (1984, 20).

The reader not only experiences Horace's working conditions but also enters the world of a student, one in which "a high premium is placed on punctuality and on 'being where you're supposed to be.'" This occurs at the expense of reflection, academic rigor, and the quest for thoughtful consideration of ideas. Sizer likens high school to an "academic super-

market [the purpose of which] is to pick things up, in an organized and predictable way, the faster the better" (1984, 80).

The result is a school in which almost everyone is happy (read docile). Students are in classrooms, parents are free to go to work, and principals can maintain order and predictability. There is little disagreement and, consequently, no astonishment. "If classroom sounds were colors," Sizer muses, "those in this school would be pastels" (1984, 27). Sizer's allegation is meant to suggest more than the notion that education should boast a more dynamic spectrum of colors. He is, rather, echoing Maxine Greene's persuasive maxim: the purpose of education is to trouble the comfortable and comfort the troubled (Greene 1988). Like only a handful of education writers before him, Sizer questions what it means to be a "good" high school.[1] Sizer sees neither comfort nor trouble as he takes us through the daily lives of teachers, students, and programs.

Sizer's critique is effective, if at times sardonic. Both its saliency and readability stand out among the deluge of recent reports on education. Sizer sees schools in need of reorganization, of bottom-up change. The specifics of that change, however, are left vague in the 1984 book.

Enter *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School.* After working with the Coalition of Essential Schools for eight years, Sizer has many concrete suggestions for redesigning schools. "There is no one best model," writes Sizer (1992, xi). Change must come from school personnel. He takes the reader back to the fictional Franklin High School where Horace now heads a committee that is to review the "purposes and practices" of the school and suggest reform (1992, 15). His committee is entirely local, comprised of teachers, students, parents, a university professor, and an occasional administrator.

Throughout the book, the reader eavesdrops on the committee's deliberations. The members struggle through tough considerations of curriculum content, assessment, standards, scheduling, resource allocation, professionalism, and hierarchy.

"What's the curriculum to be?" a teacher asks.

"How can there be only one curriculum?" another committee member adds. If kids differ, "then what we give them should also differ."

"The point is not what we give," Horace reminds the committee, "it's what the kids learn" (1992, 102). Though the dialogue is hardly artful and at times downright irritating, it adequately conveys the difficulties and frustrations inherent in grass-roots reform. More important, the medium is the message: reformers need to listen to teachers, parents, and students. Accordingly (and perhaps self-consciously on Sizer's part), the professor on the committee speaks only in response to the practitioners' dialogue. "The necessary detailing of any curriculum," writes Sizer, "must be done by those who will teach it" (1992, 151).

Sizer's solution to the woes of an overburdened curriculum is to relegate the minutiae of curriculum choices to teachers. He proposes a simple three-compartment shell for school curricular decisions: Mathe-

matics/Science, the Arts, and History/Philosophy. In addition, all faculty would be responsible for student development in a fourth area: Inquiry and Expression.

In his attempts to simplify the structure of the high-school curriculum, Sizer advocates considerable trimming of the unrealistic number of goals that schools embrace. He would eliminate many of the "special programs" that now operate in schools, thereby making more time for the Big Three. At the same time, "exhibition of mastery" would be required of students in these defined areas (1992, 214).

Reluctant, I'm sure, to align himself with "back-to-basics" reformers such as Allan Bloom or E. D. Hirsch who advocate a *specific* common curriculum[2]—presumably theirs—Sizer makes clear that a committee of faculty and community members would decide the content and form of the exhibitions. Through seven specific examples, he demonstrates the variety of talents and expertise that students might employ when "exhibiting."

If educators in the 1980s struggled to create an agenda for change (Sizer and *Horace's Compromise* included), reformers in the 1990s are moving toward implementation. *Horace's School* makes the connection. At once visionary and pragmatic, it bridges theory and practice. "We have tried honestly to bring the cosmic to the level of the nitty-gritty of schoolkeeping," the committee writes in its report (1992, 151). But this is Sizer writing, the voice of a professor of education drawing from his own experience as a teacher, headmaster, and founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Through each new exhibition presented, Sizer demonstrates a deep concern about practice and specifically about students. *Horace's School* provides rich, concrete examples and will prove valuable to like-minded educators.

Curiously, the daily lives of students are ignored by many otherwise superb educational researchers and writers. *The Shopping Mall High School* (1985) by Arthur Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David Cohen, for example, offers a valuable description of power games played out in schools, but offers little in the way of what students actually do. *The Good High School* (1983), Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's excellent disclosure of the passivity encouraged in several "good" high schools, presents a collage of impressions by a connoisseur of observation; any individual student's daily school life, however, remains a mystery. Finally, *A Nation at Risk*, from the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), warns against the "rising tide of mediocrity" and advocates something called "excellence" while largely ignoring not only students but also teachers and administrators. *Horace's Compromise* and *Horace's School*, despite their titles, are unequivocally student-centered books (albeit the former more than the latter). Adopting a decidedly unconventional approach to pedagogical discourse, Sizer constantly reminds the reader that schooling is primarily about students.

Consideration of students in education reform requires recognition of the student's world. Adolescence is an irrefutable element of that world.

Sizer is one of few education writers willing to acknowledge adolescent sexuality. The oddly ignored transitional issues of puberty occupy a full 13 pages in *Horace's Compromise* in the section "Commonality":

> Not surprisingly, sex is especially potent for adolescents. Puberty spawns arousal, and all the excitement, guilt, pleasure, and fear that go with it. When I was a high school principal, I often threatened, but never had the courage, to put a sign on my desk: HIGH SCHOOL IS HORMONES. The aphorism sums up all too well many charged, awkward confrontations with students. (1984, 47)

What is most refreshing about Sizer's indictment, however, is his refusal to bask in it. His criticism is the stronger for his eagerness to rapidly leave it behind. Sizer's avid optimism lies in sharp contrast to the cynicism apparent in many of the reports from the 1980s. Philip Cusick's *The Egalitarian Ideal and the American High School*, for example, is typical of a series of critical works that are dogged by their own lack of vision. While Cusick's work focuses on the current ills of American education, *Horace's Compromise* asks what the future *ought* to bring. Less a cynic than a reformer, Sizer is quick to suggest change. The presumed universality of these changes, however, brings me to several points of concern.

Overburdened curricula, disenfranchised teachers, and faulty assessment are not the only hurdles many of our nation's adolescents face in school. Significant numbers of schools throughout the country are besieged by the hopelessness, violence, and apathy that accompany inner-city poverty. These schools are not represented in Sizer's work. Franklin High School is explicitly suburban and relatively well equipped to undergo lengthy deliberations and change. Yet important reports like Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991) expose the dire conditions under which some schools operate. To assume that teachers, parents, students, and principals of these schools can work productively in a committee, unscathed by years of despair and neglect, understates the immense nature of the task. I have doubts about the following claims: (1) little or no money is needed for meaningful school reform; (2) reform by committee will necessarily motivate change.

First, Sizer commits (in both *Horace's School* and the Coalition of Essential Schools' "Re: Learning Initiative") to keeping added costs to within 10 percent of current expenditures. Political expediency aside, after reading Kozol's book it is difficult to imagine fundamental change occurring in some of the places where change is most needed. On their bad days, the members of Horace's committee complain that they have no telephones, no offices, and limited access to photocopying (1992, 120). Kozol reports schools without water or heat, without pencils, and without books. Sizer does not account for these schools. While I do not expect Sizer's reform effort to resolve the intractable problems of poverty, a consideration of school reform in inner-city settings would have been illuminating.

Second, in the final chapter of *Horace's School*, Sizer describes a school in which teachers and administrators are plagued by apathy. Sizer's guest

presentation to the teachers and the principal falls on tired, closed ears. He was preceded, he writes, by a "promise of irrelevance"(1992, 195). Such schools are unfortunately familiar to many educators, more familiar than those that might encourage the type of dialogue we hear in Horace's committee. Sizer claims a coordinated effort is necessary to facilitate bottom-up change. But *Horace's School* bypasses the following question: how do we move from dysfunctional school communities to ones in which the kinds of coordinated and sustained efforts that Sizer describes become possible?

One thought regarding secondary school education on which all reformers can agree is that there are problems—indeed pernicious ones—with the ways in which our schools and curricula are organized. To ask if Sizer's proposal is a thoroughly airtight remedy for all high schools' ills would be to miss the point. Sizer is a reformer, and any undaunted reformer must first take a step forward with a vision. *Horace's Compromise* suggests a courageous first step toward a truly "re-organized" school curriculum. In *Horace's School,* Sizer goes further. He offers a concrete design for change, one that must inevitably be shaped by those who will implement it.

Yes, there are omissions—schools extraordinarily deprived of resources, for example; and there are, as Sizer acknowledges, organizational obstacles. Considering, however, the precarious condition of the house-of-cards organization that now burdens curricula in the classroom and the school, it would behoove anyone sincerely interested in change to reflect on what Sizer says: piecemeal reform does not work. The triangles of student, teacher, and subject need to emerge as the focus and not the base of the hierarchy. "The best we educational planners can do," Sizer notes, "is to create the most likely conditions for [teachers and students] to flourish, and then get out of their way" (1984, 221). Nothing short of a complete structural overhaul will suffice. Radical? It is time we acknowledge what the Horaces of our schools always knew, and what Sizer's writing makes remarkably evident. Before the cards come tumbling down on their own, it is time we reshuffled the deck.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Philip W. Jackson's *Life in Classrooms* ([1968] 1990) or Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's *The Good High School* (1983).
2. See Allan Bloom's, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and E. D. Hirsch's, *Cultural Literacy* (1987).